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Contemporary



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Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

Captain John S. Bradford

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

ade runner in the Surratt house. On the other hand, by the time he wrote his memoir of the event (about thirty years later), he could say of southern Maryland that "The only true friends the Union had down there were the colored people." His gratitude to that race, which he seems otherwise to have known only as servants, was doubtless increased when, during the trial of John Surratt in 1867,

One day, I was waited on by two ladies, Mrs. Griffen and Mrs. Thomas L. Tullock, representing a committee of the loyal ladies of Washington, who stated that they had come to me from Secretary Stanton to say that I should in no way feel alarmed during my attendance at court; that the Secretary had taken the precaution to have a number of colored men in the court room every day who would take care that the Government witnesses should not be insulted or subjected to bodily harm.

This wise precaution of Mr. Stanton was an actual fact; there were three rows of benches which were occupied as long as the trial lasted by colored men. They were always orderly and polite in their behavior, but their presence was a great restraint on the element which sympathized with Surratt, and, I believe, was often the means of checking an outbreak in the court room.

Otherwise, we know only that he regularly held a patronage job from all Republican administrations till 1885 and that whenever the Democrats gained control, he was turned out in the cold.

There is enough information in Weichmann's account to suggest a book on the disputes having to do with Catholicism that grew out of the trials of the assassins. Indeed, this is almost a subplot of the book. Payne was a Baptist; Booth, an Episcopalian; Atzerodt, a Lutheran; and Weichmann, a key prosecution witness, was a Catholic himself; nevertheless, it did not take long for the anti-Catholic agitators to dream up allegations that Lincoln's assassination was a papal plot. To a surprising degree, Weichmann suggests that Catholics themselves had much to do with bringing on the hatred and suspicion. At the trial of John Surratt, twenty students from St. Charles College (where John and Louis both had studied for the priesthood) came with a professor (Louis's former father confessor) and shook hands with the accused prisoner, the priest sitting at Surratt's side all day. None so much as acknowledged Weichmann's presence.

Out of such actions as these, and out of the doings of Fathers Boucher and LaPierre, who secreted Surratt in Canada and who arranged and facilitated his escape to Europe, coupled with the fact that some of the priests and other prominent Catholics in Washington, have persistently and unscrupulously maligned the Government, the Military Commission, the witnesses for the prosecution, because of the verdict in Mrs. Surratt's case, more than from any other circumstances, has grown the charge that the assassination was the outcome of a Catholic plot.

He does go on to say that "the charge is too ridiculous for a moment's consideration." But so little attention to the forces of bigotry that raised the charge seems curious in a Catholic. True, he admits asking Stanton for a job when his Bishop refused to answer his letter (in the summer of 1865) requesting permission to resume his religious studies. This incident typifies the great weakness of the account. It is only from Weichmann's obituary, carefully added by Risvold in the useful appendix to the account, that we learn that Weichmann left the Church altogether (until just before his death).

He does not bother to tell us this interesting biographical tidbit, and he is not by any means required to by the rules of evidence. Still, it certainly alters our understanding of his perception of the causes of the Catholic plot theory. We still do not understand the man behind the testimony.

By today's standards, the standards of the nineteenth-century justice system often seem appalling. Weichmann received

a government job for his part in the trials of the assassins. Writers have never forgiven him (or the government) for this. Yet something else comes to mind. Weichmann wrote this manuscript justifying his role in the trials late in his life, some thirty years after the event, and even then only in response to frequent newspaper stories that impugned his testimony. He did not rush out of the courtroom door of this, the most famous state trial in American history, get a large advance from a publisher, and try to get rich off his dutiful participation in the trial. Standards of justice have not necessarily changed all for the better.

Recent Acquisitions: A Presentation Copy of the *Debates*

Abraham Lincoln's education was, in his own estimation, "defective." The frontier environment of his youth prevented his owning many books in the years when he had much time for reading. He regretted his "want of education," as he said in his autobiography written for John L. Scripps in 1860, and tried throughout his life "to supply the want." He studied grammar after he was twenty-three years old and "had separated from his father." He studied geometry after he was forty years old and had already served a term in the United States House of Representatives.

The habits of youth nevertheless leave indelible traces, and Lincoln showed no special fondness for books as such. He never accumulated a library like Jefferson's or Washington's. He was not, like Rutherford B. Hayes or Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a book collector. Unlike Woodrow Wilson or Theodore Roosevelt, he never wrote books. Therefore, books that are directly associated with Abraham Lincoln are extremely rare. He almost never wrote marginalia in his books; in fact, he rarely wrote his name in a book.

For these reasons, and others, a signed copy of a book for which Abraham Lincoln supplied almost half the text himself is considered a major rarity. The only book that Lincoln in any sense "wrote" was the *Political Debates Between Hon. Abraham Lincoln and Hon. Stephen A. Douglas in the Celebrated Campaign of 1858, in Illinois*. . . (Columbus: Follett, Foster and Company, 1860). Lincoln thought he won the great debates, and he was careful to preserve a newspaper clipping of every speech. He pasted these into an attractive scrapbook. Lincoln turned down one publication offer in 1858, probably thinking it would be too early to have political effect. In 1859, his campaign tour to Ohio seems to have brought the scrapbook to the attention of Republican leaders in that state, and Oran Follett, editor of the *Ohio State Journal*, early Republican, and owner of the Follett, Foster publishing house, printed the book in 1860. Lincoln received, it is said, one hundred copies, and to date eighteen copies which he signed and presented to friends have been found. The Lincoln Library and Museum is happy to announce the acquisition of one of these presentation copies, bearing the pencil inscription, "Capt. J. S. Bradford From A. Lincoln."

Only one copy of the *Debates* is inscribed in ink, the copy Lincoln gave to his former law partner Stephen T. Logan. On it, the ink is badly smeared because the endpapers are porous and soft, and book collectors assume that, from then on, Lincoln knew to inscribe the books in pencil.

Captain John S. Bradford seems at first glance to be an unlikely recipient of Lincoln's book. He was a life-long Democrat who led a restless and varied life. Born in Philadelphia in 1815, he was trained to be a bookbinder. He apparently decided he wanted to see Mexico and started working his way west from Philadelphia. In Richmond, Indiana, he joined the

United States Corps of Engineers in building the National Road. The road terminated in Vandalia, Illinois, in 1840, and so did Bradford's employment on the project. He then moved to Springfield late the same year. In 1841, he bought half of a partnership in a bookbindery which became the firm of Johnson and Bradford.

Lincoln's addressing him as "Captain" betokened Bradford's long-standing military interests. He joined a militia unit known as the Springfield Cadets and went to Nauvoo in 1845, when disturbances with the Mormons in that area led Governor Thomas Ford to call out the militia. In 1846, he enlisted in Company A, Fourth Illinois Infantry, the unit commanded by Lincoln's Whig friend Edward D. Baker, and went to Mexico, where he became a Commissary of the United States Army. He was present at the capture of Vera Cruz, the Battle of Cerro Gordo, and other battles in the Mexican War. He returned with the Illinois regiment in September of 1847, only to leave again early in 1849 to seek gold in California.

Apparently, Bradford went to California with his brother-in-law James Semple, who had been United States Senator from Illinois (1843-1847) and Associate Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court (1843). They engaged not in mining but in supplying the miners with goods and food. They began with a simple pack train, carrying goods from Sacramento. Later they bought wagons and opened a store, forming the firm of Semple, Robinson, and Company, for the transaction of "general business." They even purchased a ship with a cargo of East Indian goods and disassembled it to make a wharf. They must have been successful, for Bradford was elected representative in his Benicia (Sonoma) district when the military commander of the Department of the Pacific ordered a government to be formed for a new state (even before California was a state). In 1850, when California gained admission to the Union, he was reelected to the first state legislature. A year later, he returned home to his family, which he had left behind in Springfield. He remained in partnership with Johnson in the bindery and in 1857 became Superintendent of Public Instruction for Sangamon County.

When the Civil War broke out (and probably after he already had received his copy of the *Debates* from Abraham Lincoln), Republican Governor Richard Yates recognized Bradford's qualifications despite his party identification and appointed him Commissary with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, Governor Yates's first military commission for the war.

After the war, Bradford served as mayor of Springfield, invoking tough sanitation measures when a smallpox epidemic broke out. He was noted for his involvement in charitable and cultural institutions. He served on the board of the Illinois State University, a Lutheran college which flourished briefly in Springfield, and he raised money for the Springfield Home for the Friendless, a charitable institution for homeless women and children.

In 1869, Bradford ended his connection with Johnson and Bradford and opened a book store. Then his restless spirit showed itself again. He sold the store in 1873 and moved to Aberdeen, Mississippi, where he remained for two years. He returned again to Springfield, where, in 1876, he became Crier of the Court and United States Commissioner. He was an Episcopalian, a Mason, and a Knight Templar. He was always described as a staunch Democrat as well. Why did Lincoln give him a copy of his *Debates*? Probably because Bradford was Lincoln's neighbor, living across the street from the Lincoln home at Eighth and Jackson in Springfield. It was an election year and these were political speeches, but Abraham Lincoln remembered his neighbor.

The Bradford copy contains a tipped-in affidavit on the flyleaf just under the Lincoln signature. It reads:

State of Washington
County of King)ss

Donald Bradford being first sworn on oath says that he

is the son of Capt. John S. Bradford, at one time Mayor of Springfield, Ill., and a personal friend of Abraham Lincoln, living across the street from Lincoln's home. (See reference page 428, Sandberg's [sic] *Life of Lincoln*, Vol. 1) Capt. John S. Bradford died in 1892 and among his effects was a library containing the within book which came to affiant at that time, and which has been in his continuous possession ever since. That affiant knows from his father's personal statements to him that this book had been in the continuous possession of his father from the time that he received said book from Lincoln with his name inscribed on this page, viz: "A Lincoln" That affiant knows that said signature is genuine and the signature of A. Lincoln as it purports to be.

Affiant is the youngest son of Capt. J. S. Bradford and resides in Seattle, Wash. That formerly, in 1890, he was mayor of Helena, Mont., and publisher of the Rocky Mountain Magazine.

[signed] *Donald Bradford*

Subscribed & Sworn to before me this 11th. day of May, 1934.

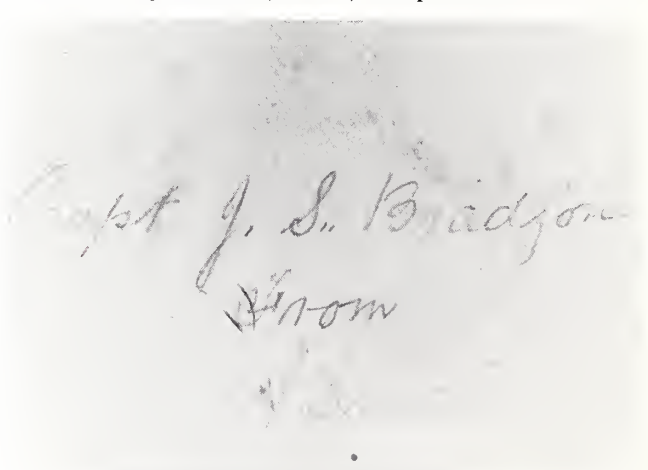
[signed] *A. M. Booth*

Notary Public at Seattle, Wn

William H. Herndon recalled that Lincoln "had failed to induce any publisher in Springfield to undertake the enterprise [of publishing the debates], thus proving anew that 'a prophet is not without honor, save in his own country.'" In fact, Herndon wrote in 1889:

A gentleman is still living, who at the time of the debate between Lincoln and Douglas, was a book publisher in Springfield. Lincoln had collected newspaper slips of all the speeches made during the debate, and proposed to him their publication in book form; but the man declined, fearing there would be no demand for such a book. Subsequently, when the speeches were gotten out in book form in Ohio, Mr. Lincoln procured a copy and gave it to his Springfield friend, writing on the flyleaf, "Compliments of A. Lincoln."

The inscription is not the same as the one made to J. S. Bradford, but one wonders whether this might not be the very copy to which Herndon referred. If it is, then Bradford doubtless kicked himself for his decision. The *Debates* were a nineteenth-century best seller; over 30,000 copies were sold in 1860.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

FIGURE 3. An old list locating the signed copies of the *Debates* indicates that Lincoln most often inscribed the copies with the recipient's name followed by "from" on the next line and his signature ("A. Lincoln") below that. Other inscriptions are in the form "A. L." or "A. Lincoln" followed by "to" and the recipient's name. In others, Lincoln wrote "Presented to," the recipient's name, and "by A. Lincoln" on the next line.

